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YEHUDA NINI, ed. אל-מסודה: פנקס בית הדין של קהילת יהודי צנעא במאה ה-18 [*Al-Misawwadeh: Bēth-Dīn (Court) Records of the Sanʿānī Jewish Community in the Eighteenth Century*], vol. 1. Translated into Hebrew by Nissim B. Gamlieli. Tel Aviv: The Diaspora Research Institute, Tel Aviv University, 2001. Pp. 89 + 469 + 2 (English abstract).

The Arabic term *musawwadah* denotes "a draft," "notes," or "a day-book." The volume under review, titled *Al-Misawwadeh*, reflects the pronunciation of the Ṣanʿānī Arabic dialect. This volume contains 1,372 of the *misawwadeh* documents, constituting records of judgments passed by the *Bēth Dīn* ("rabbinical court") of the Jewish Community of Ṣanʿāʾ, dating from the early 18th century to the 1860s. They are written in the Judeo-Arabic dialect that was prevalent among the Jews of Ṣanʿāʾ. Judeo-Arabic, as is well known, is written in the Arabic language using Hebrew characters, a fact which is also true of the *misawwadeh* texts. The documents are characterized by brevity, registering only the final judgment rendered by the court without any reference to the halakhic basis for these rulings. Despite their economy of expression, they are remarkably lucid.

The records contained in this volume are provided both in the original Judeo-Arabic and in Hebrew translation. The arduous task of the translation was undertaken by Nissim B. Gamlieli, a Yemeni scholar well known for his expertise in Yemeni Arabic in general, and Yemeni Judeo-Arabic in particular. He is to be commended for his meticulously accurate translation, which reflects the felicity and beauty of diction of the original Judeo-Arabic texts.

It should be noted that despite the fast growing body of scholarship relating to the history and other aspects of the Jews of Yemen, our knowledge of this community is still relatively sparse. The few chronicles written by the Yemeni Jews themselves cover only the past few hundred years, and even then they do not provide a systematic presentation of the historical events that befell the Jews of Yemen, nor of their customs and socioeconomic conditions. These chronicles are presented as snapshots of selected events that pass before us in a fragmented and incoherent procession, replete with gaps.

Several factors account for the scarcity of records relating to the Jews of Yemen. One may be the high cost and rarity of writing materials and the total lack of printing facilities. As late as the beginning of the 20th century, as noted by Ameen Riḥani, paper was a very rare commodity in Yemen. The scantiness of writing facilities in Yemen undoubtedly accounts for the marvelous ability of the Yemeni Jews to read a book sideways or upside down and from all possible corners. This ability was developed as a result of the necessity of the Yemeni Jewish children to study the Hebrew Scriptures and other sacred writings seated around one single copy of a book.

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The scarcity of writing materials may also account for the selective attitude which the Yemeni Jews had developed toward their own writings. Manuscripts which had practical value were copied and preserved. Some were used as flyleaves for the binding of sacred books, while others were discarded and subsequently sank into oblivion. Thus, for example, only fragments of the work of Rabbi Yeḥia Ṣalih (1715–1805), who is known to have written a history of the Jews of Yemen, are extant.

Moreover, many of the written records must have been destroyed in the course of the frequent political upheavals that in many cases had a devastating impact upon Ṣanʿā', the Yemeni capital, in general and the Jewish community in particular. Most destructive, however, was the expulsion of the Jews of Ṣanʿā' and other locales in Yemen to the remote region of Mawzaʿ in 1679/80, an event which was preceded by the demolition of synagogues. Extant Yemeni Jewish documents relate that scrolls and writings housed in synagogues were torn and trampled upon by the mob, while others were burned; still others were abandoned by the Jews who would not carry them into exile.

This state of affairs underscores the value of the discovery and publication of the *misawwadeh* records, which provide an invaluable treasure of primary material reflecting the reality of the 18th-century Ṣanʿānī Jewish community in the multifaceted relations among its own members, as well as with its neighbors and government authorities. These records provide us with deep and intimate insights into the ritual and socioeconomic life of a major portion of the Jews of Yemen. They shed light on the life of the diverse components of the Jewish community, men and women, young and old, orphans and widows, the rich and the poor, including specific patterns and norms of their behavior. Offering impressive information about the design and structure of Jewish houses and the furniture, utensils and other implements used at home, they also yield knowledge about the craftsmen and their tools, the clothing that was in vogue, coins and currency, and the types and prices of books that were read.

One of the most instructive aspects of the *misawwadeh* lies in what it reveals about the spiritual climate of the time. The records reflect an authoritative rabbinical court highly respected, even feared, by the Jewish community. Evidently, much of the court's coercive power derived from its pervasive use of the threat of imposing the punishment of *ḥerem* (excommunication), on a person who disobeyed it or lied to it. Such a punishment, sanctioned by the *halakha* (Jewish law), involved the cutting off of all social and business relations with the recalcitrant culprit.

As noted above, the *misawwadeh* collection consists of legal records emanating from the Ṣanʿā' rabbinical court. This fact is very significant, since the rabbinical court of the Jewish community of Ṣanʿā', the capital of Yemen, played a pivotal role, at least in the past few centuries, in providing spiritual and religious guidance and leadership to the Jews of Yemen who were widely dispersed throughout the country. Thus, these court records

throw some sidelights on the life of other Jewish communities in Yemen. These and other factors make the material preserved in the *misawwadeh* a unique and invaluable source of knowledge about 18th-century Yemeni Jewry.

The *misawwadeh* records, which comprise 467 pages of this volume, are preceded by a well-documented introduction (eighty pages) that presents a concise but wide-ranging historical overview of the Jews of Ṣanʿāʾ—within the context of the totality of the Jews of Yemen and Yemen itself—focusing mainly on the 17th and 18th centuries. The editor's introduction provides a very brief treatment of diverse historical events, including the occupation of Yemen by the Ottomans and their expulsion, anti-Jewish edicts enacted by the Yemeni government, and messianic movements. The introduction also provides some insights into the cultural, religious, and socioeconomic structure of the Jewish community of Ṣanʿāʾ, focusing mainly on its leadership, institutions, rabbinical court, and aspects of daily life. The author of the introduction also provides some snapshots extracted from the *misawwadeh*. While much of the material presented in this introduction is not substantially new, it affords a valuable perspective on the court records, placing events in their proper historical context and providing a synchronic and diachronic picture of the lives of the Jews of Yemen. Much valuable information is encapsulated in these pages.

The publication of the court records contained in this volume along with a Hebrew translation is a highly commendable accomplishment in and of itself. One wishes, however, for a deeply probing critical analysis of the records that would subject them to a rigidly scientific treatment and extract from them whatever information is likely to contribute to the portrait of the Jewish community depicted in them. What is really needed is an annotated critical edition of the material that would also include a study that reflects *inter alia* the ethnographic, artistic, literary, linguistic, religious, and folkloristic elements which the court documents mirror. It would certainly be very useful to say something about the major distinct features of the Yemeni Judeo-Arabic dialect as reflected in the documents. An examination of the rabbinical court within the context of the Yemeni society and the Yemeni court system would also be valuable.

As noted above, the present volume includes 1,372 of the *misawwadeh* records. These documents vary widely in length, ranging from more than one page to a mere two to three lines each; many of them are of the latter category. The majority of these documents relate to marriages, divorces, and inheritance. Except for the names of the litigants, many of the brief records are almost identical and therefore the inclusion of all of them in the volume appears redundant. The documents should have been subjected to rigorous scrutiny and critical sifting.

I should note, however, that the editor is a reputable scholar whose numerous publications in the field of Yemeni studies display many-sided versatility and vast erudition. In his introduction to this volume, he indicates

that he intends to publish two more volumes relating to the *misawwadeh*. I expect him to bring his superb critical acumen to bear upon these highly valuable records.

In sum, the editor is to be congratulated for yet another major contribution to the field of Yemeni studies. This is a book from which scholars in this field and related areas can profit immensely.

The Ohio State University REUBEN AHRONI